

BLACKSMITHING

HEIDGEN CO.  
EST. 1865

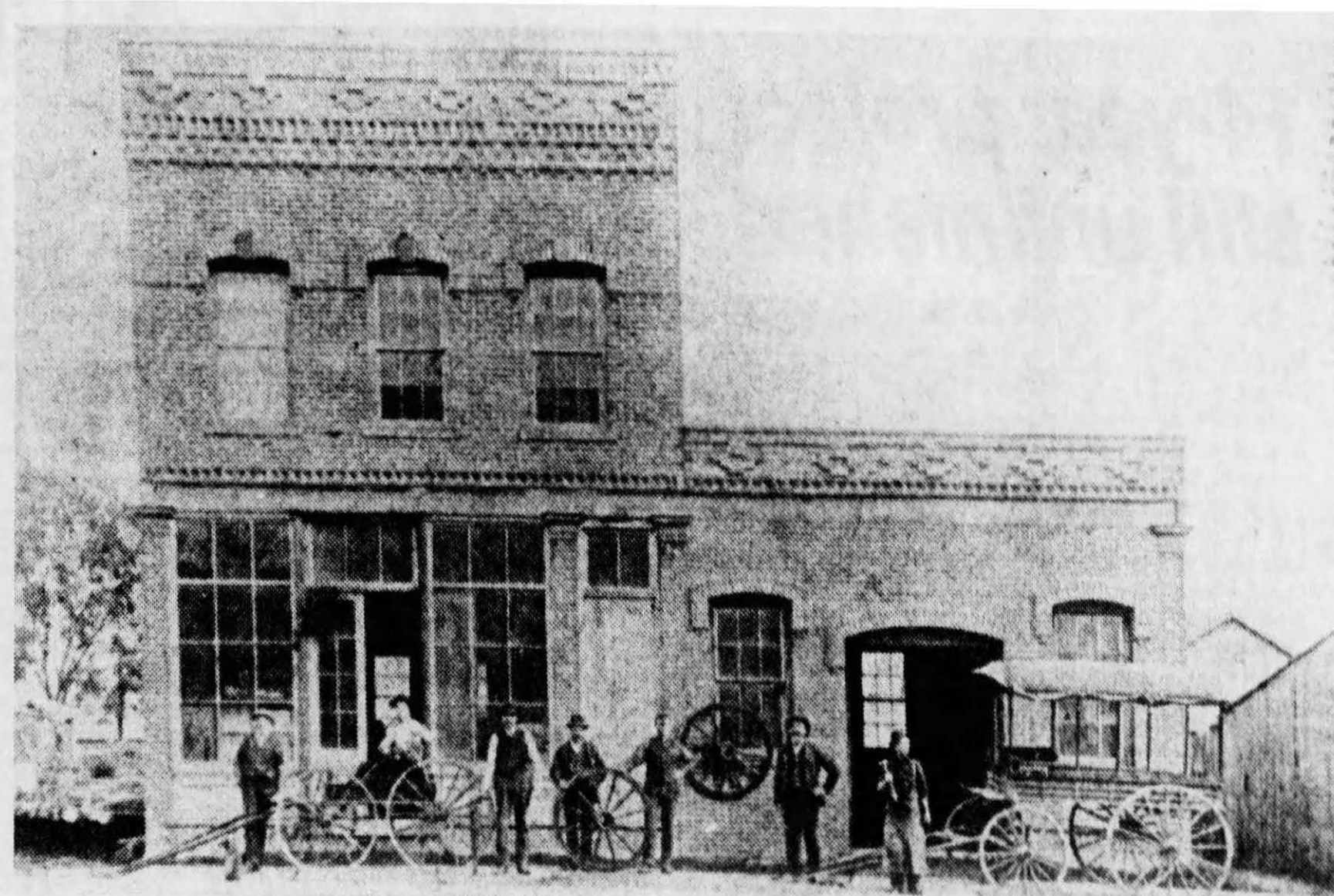
WELDING





Blacksmith Clarence Heidgen, 71, works in his shop his grandfather started at 115 S. Broadway.

Press-Gazette photo



The shop in about 1885, with Clarence's grandfather, Matt, right, and father, John, third from right.

Special to the Press-Gazette



Press-Gazette photo

Heidgen shapes hot iron atop an anvil.



# *Smith's perfect work record just 'luck'*

By **DAVE TIANEN**

Of the Press-Gazette

For a man who's been working with torches and heavy hammers for nearly half a century, blacksmith Clarence Heidgen has never gotten much sick time off.

Clarence does remember coming real close to some sick leave about 20 years ago when he accidentally lit the gas tank of a car as he was welding a trailer hitch on to it. Clarence escaped without significant injury but the car ended up a bit on the crispy side.

"I've never been injured," Clarence says. "It isn't that I'm smart, I'm just lucky."

Missing his fair quota of sick time wouldn't be too bad if Clarence wasn't so critically overdue for a vacation.

Heidgen has been on the job since FDR's first term and he still hasn't collected his first week of vacation.

"I'd like to take a vacation before I die," says the smith, "but I don't know if I'm going to make it."

Heidgen has what one would have to concede is an excellent grounding in his trade. Heidgen Welding and Blacksmith Shop, 115 S. Broadway, was started by his grandfather, Matt, the year the Civil War ended. Clarence inherited the family business from his father, John, who died on the job at the age of 85. Clarence, who is still a comparative youth at 71, explains that blacksmithing practitioners have to work that long in order just to make a living.

Despite his rather lengthy apprenticeship, Heidgen doesn't claim to have mastered all the finer aspects of his

trade.

"Now-a-days, it's comparatively easy. I think a young fellow could make it go, but it takes a long time to learn. In fact, what I don't know would fill a bigger book than what I do. I wore out at least three old blacksmiths. Those old fellows . . . I could always learn a lot from those guys, but there's not many from those ranks to chose from," Heidgen said.

Clarence's last assistant spent over 25 years with him, but he is now 85 and lives in a nursing home.

Four legged clients, once the bulk of the blacksmith business, provide a rather minute portion of Clarence's present business. To be more precise, Clarence estimates there hasn't been a horse in the shop since 1935.

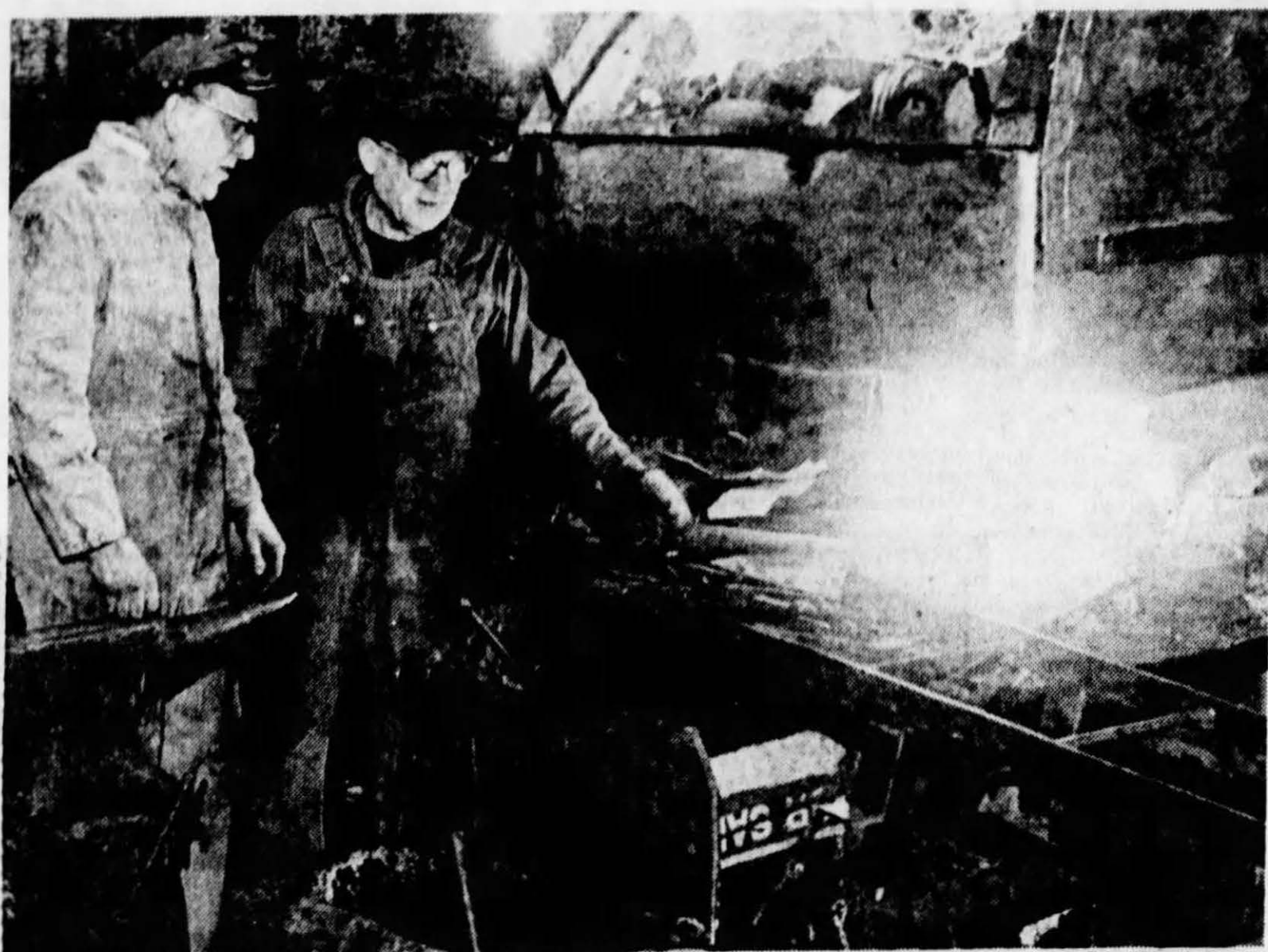
The bulk of the business is now made

up of welding trailer hitches and minor tool repair, a line of trade with somewhat less poetic dimension than that commemorated by Longfellow. There's still, however, enough gritty nostalgia in a blacksmith shop to make Clarence's business a minor mecca for local photographers.

Photo bugs aren't the only ones that have found Clarence's shop an attractive haven. Heidgen has been subsidizing the marginal stratas of Broadway society with low interest coffee loans since the 30s.

"There was always some bum, in here soaking up heat in the old days," Clarence says.

He describes his lending enterprises in these terms: "We do a lot of business, but we don't make any business. But we're diversified."



Press-Gazette Photo

Blacksmith Clarence Heidgen and Howard Robrecht at Forge

# There's Always Work for a Blacksmith

BY DICK KARBON

Press-Gazette Staff Writer

The floor is littered with scrap metal, layers of dirt and old tools.

A chunk of wood smolders in the old forge. Thin ribbons of smoke wind upward into the chimney.

Clarence Heidgen bends over a dimly lit workbench. He clamps a vice grip on a fractured basketball hoop and then looks up.

"They say I got the dirtiest shop in town," he said, smiling as he wipes his hands on his coveralls and adjusts his worn cap, "but I can't help it."

Heidgen is a blacksmith, one of the few remaining. His small, cluttered shop at 115 S. Broadway has been there for 113 years.

"The same building, the same place since 1865 when my grandfather started it during the Civil War," said Heidgen, proudly.

A step inside is like a journey into yesteryear.

Heidgen says some of the handmade blacksmith tools probably were used by his grandfather. There are bits and pieces of metal from bygone horse and buggy days.

"You'd be suprised, sometimes ladies will come in and want to buy that crap off the wall," he said, pointing to pieces of once-useful ironwork. "They're collecting antiques, I guess."

"I used to keep books at Swift's, worked there about four years. They wanted to transfer me to Duluth, but I didn't want to go so I came here to work for my dad. That was in 1936, about 40 years ago."

Heidgen fell silent and then sighed to himself, "Geez, is it that long already?"

About 75 percent of Heidgen's business is welding. But he still does many blacksmithing jobs, though few horseshoes.

"I never did any shoeing myself. My dad was about 70 when he quit shoeing, and that's when I started here."

"I get everybody's troubles," he said, grinning. "Either it's broke and they want it fixed or they can't buy it so they want me to make it."

"I made 120 pair of ornamental hinges for a house this past year. The irony of this is the woman wants

them all rusted, for crumps sake. Anybody else wants them nice and clean."

"But she wants rust so I get out the salt brine barrel and throw 'em in. Geez and plutz, you wouldn't give five cents for them the way they looked, but she says they're just wonderful."

"That's why I like the job, it's a challenge. It's interesting work but not too lucrative."

"You go into a machine shop and they charge you \$15-16 dollars an hour. I try to charge \$9 an hour but it's hard at times."

"People come in and say 'how much is it going to cost?' Geez winnigens, I don't know. I'll tell you when it's done. I got to make it from scratch."

One of the things Heidgen is making from scratch is a set of horseshoes connected by chains.

"They're for a magician," he said. "He puts them behind his back and the shoes come apart. But I must have put them together wrong because they don't come apart the way they're supposed to. I'll have to do them over."

Heidgen is 68. He works by himself except for a part-time helper. He said he has no regrets over his choice of occupation.

"I like the iron," he said, fondling a specially forged axehead for a paper company. "That's the whole thing, I like to work with iron."

"I'm too old to change. I'd hate to work in a shop where you do the same thing all day long. I'll leave here when they carry me out. I'll just drift on and on until I can't anymore."

"To be honest with you, I don't know what I would do if I couldn't work here. I've always had too much work to do, never even had time to get married. Shoot, I was too slow to get married. I never had time."

"The doctor says 'keep on working, then the relatives can have a good time on you.'"

"But what the hell. My dad always said there would be work for a blacksmith and I guess there will be. I'm always two weeks behind. I've had jobs sitting under the bench for a couple years. But the people said they were in no hurry and I'll get to them sooner or later."

Heidgen said he might like having someone younger take over the business some day, but. . . "a kid today should get \$150 to \$200 a week. How the heck are you going to pay that with this peanut stuff?"

"Looking ahead, you would think some young fella would like it. But you can't blame a guy if he doesn't want to work in this kind of place for the kind of money he'd get."

"Maybe I don't charge enough, but I hate to soak a guy. One guy I'll charge \$4 and he'll give me a five dollar bill and say 'keep it.' The next guy I'll charge a dollar and a half and he'll give me a buck and walk out."

"Everybody says to me 'you're always bitching, but if you didn't like it you'da quit long ago.'"

"I guess they're right. If I close up the world will go on. I don't know who will do the blacksmithing, but the world will go on."

"I should clean this place up some day," he said, shoving a piece of metal out of the way with the tattered toe of his shoe, "but I got too much work to do."

And, with that, Clarence Heidgen went back to work.



# Forge's fire flickering into history

■ Clarence Heidgen is closing the shop that opened the year the Civil War ended

By Don Langenkamp

Press-Gazette

Broadway blacksmith Clarence Heidgen doesn't want to leave his forge and anvil and his niche in local history — even after 57 years.

"I got two weeks to get out," he muttered Friday, eyeing May 1 as though it were doomsday.

Heidgen, 83, said Zeise Construction Co., which owns the 128-year-old building where he has his shop at 115 S. Broadway, wants to tear it down soon.

Then all he'll have is memories of the place and the street he grew up on and got old with.

"I don't like getting out, but someday I suppose I'll wake up and the building will be down and that will be the end of it," he said.

It was his grandfather, Matt, who started the blacksmith shop in 1865, the year the Civil War ended.

He remembers the hitching posts for horses on Broadway when he took supper to his dad back in 1918.

He also remembers when it was his turn to be the proprietor: "When I started here in '36, I was the new kid on the street. Now I'm the old buck on Broadway."

He hardly ever missed a day's work until a minor heart attack felled him about a month ago.

"Fifteen days in the hospital," he said. "First time I was ever in one."

"One reason I gotta get out is the coal dust. The doc says I've been sucking in this coal dust for more than 50 years and that's enough."

"But I don't know about that — I feel pretty good."

Good enough to stand erect and think about what he'll do next.

"I'd go nuts if I had to do nothing but sit in front of a TV set," he said.

"I got a garage and I got my torch. Maybe I'll burn the house down, but I'll do something. There's always stuff to fix."

There always has been stuff to fix and the dark, cavernous interior of his shop is littered with projects.

Heidgen never questioned his decision to follow his father and grandfather.

"I like to do something nobody



Press-Gazette photo by Ken Behrend

**End of an era:** Clarence Heidgen, 83, who is the third-generation blacksmith to operate the Heidgen Blacksmith Shop, 115 S. Broad-

way, checks the fire in the shop forge. The business has operated since 1865 but will close May 1.

else can do," he said. "And nobody else does blacksmith work."

One thing that always went with the territory was customers who didn't want to pay the price, Heidgen said.

He lapsed into a well-practiced litany of complaints tempered by a grin: "I get 17 bucks an hour and that's better than it used to be. But I gotta fight like hell to get it.

"They don't realize what it takes to do some of these things."

"People come in here and say, 'My father was a blacksmith.' And they think that's an automatic one dollar off the price. I don't care if his old man was a blacksmith."

Still, he sees himself as a soft touch.

"People say my dad gave people a break. My dad was 'good old

John,'" he said. "I guess I'm the same way."

He glanced down at a pile of cast-iron heating grates in a bucket.

"These have to be straightened," he said, preparing to fire up his forge.

"A guy from De Pere brought 'em in. He's a good guy. I'll never turn down the work."